Foreword

IS “CREATIVE VIRTUAL-TEAMS” AN OXYMORON?

I recommend this book to anyone who would like an answer to the question. It is not a trivial proposition. A certain preoccupation with things “virtual” may well have a causal relationship to growing concern in the sociotechnical development community (those seeking innovation), that things are not getting better. That, in fact, all this “virtual” communication may well be undermining creative behavior, in part by demanding that more and more attention cycles go to “coordination” rather than substantive creative thought. Others might even argue that by spending more time in “virtual team” scenarios we have less time for personal creative thought.

At the risk of being too academic, please consider the definition of “oxymoron” offered to us by a well-known “virtual encyclopedia,” the Wikipedia (2006):

An oxymoron (plural oxymora or, more commonly, oxymorons) (noun) is a figure of speech that combines two normally contradictory terms.

Oxymoron is a Greek term derived from oxy (sharp) and moros (dull). The meaning is “that which is sharp and dull,” thereby designating and also exhibiting an opposition between two adjectives, which serve as predicates for one subject.

Oxymorons are a proper subset of the expressions called contradictions in terms. What distinguishes oxymora from other paradoxes and contradictions is that they are used intentionally, for rhetorical effect, and the contradiction is only apparent, as the combination of terms provides a novel expression of some concept, such as “cruel to be kind.”

In popular usage, the term oxymoron is sometimes used more loosely, in the sense of a simple contradiction in terms. Often, it is then applied to expressions that, unlike real oxymora, are used in full earnest and without any sense of paradox by many speakers in everyday language. I encourage the reader to see that this book’s editors, Steven P. MacGregor and Teresa Torres-Coronas, use “creative virtual teams” in later sense. They and the authors of these collected works seek to empower and afford creative activity in circumstances dominated by the technology of the virtual. To my way of thinking, they strive to make the virtual-teamwork “real.”

HOW, IN THE PURSUIT OF CREATIVE BEHAVIOR, CAN “VIRTUAL TEAMS” BE MADE MORE REAL?

I encourage the reader to use the book’s extensive introduction to gain an overview of the strategies applied by our authors to make virtual teamwork real. In most cases, the context of the scenario is
overwhelming critical to choosing how best to proceed. The reader is advised to first review those papers that appear to address virtual teamwork in circumstances most like those they are encountering in their own work and organizations. There are many insightful examples. And, as is so often the case in design-thinking, it is the context that defines the successful design, not an overarching theory. Therefore, let context be your guide.

Don’t leave the book without exploring most of the other cases. They will help you gage the robustness and generality of solutions found and proposed in cases you most identify with.

Speaking for myself, I have been deeply engaged in creative product development and research teamwork for over 30 years. During the past 15 years, those teams have been increasing colocated and distributed globally and institutionally, academic and corporate. At this time, 100% of my engagements are globally distributed new product innovation teams. We use any and all technology available to do real creative teamwork.

The one and only general principal that I can offer to date is that making teammate relationships “real” is the number one functional design requirement. Any manner of physical and/or technical adaptation that furthers this goal is worth exploring. More difficult, is the need to change human behavior, especially social behavior, needed to support cocreative activity. But this is another story, for another time.

You have in your hands an extraordinary opportunity to sample the experiential wisdom of some extraordinarily bright people who have been struggling to empower creativity in virtual team. I know many of them through decades of collaboration and several “virtual teamwork scenarios” we have done together. I can speak comfortably to the fact that they know what they are talking about.

There are important practical consequences for, amongst others, engineering design, innovation management, discovery science, and knowledge management. Going beyond the big effects, there are also everyday implications for creative activity any time, anywhere with anyone.

REFERENCE


Larry Leifer has been a member of the Stanford School of Engineering ME Design faculty since 1976. He teaches a year long master’s sequence, me310, “Team-Based Design Innovation with Corporate Partners,” the “Design Theory and Methodology Research Forum,” and a freshman seminar “Designing the Human Experience: Design Thinking in Theory and Practice.” He is the founding director of the Stanford-VA Rehabilitation R&D Center (1978-89), Stanford Center for Design Research (1984), Stanford Learning Lab (1997-2002), and member of the new Hasso Plattner Institute of Design at Stanford (d.school) (2005). Active research projects include: (1) creating collaborative engineering environments for distributed product innovation teams; (2) instrumentation of that environment for design knowledge capture, indexing, reuse and performance assessment; and (3) design-for-wellbeing as socially responsible engineering.